THE BACHELOR Billionaire

On Pins and Needles With Leslie Wexner

BY JULIE BAUMGOLD

ON THE MORNING LESLIE WEXNER BECAME A BILLIONAIRE, he woke up worried, but this was not unusual. He always wakes up worried because of his dybbuk, which pokes and prods and gives him the itchiness of soul that he calls *shpilkes*. Sometimes he runs away from it on the roads of Columbus, or drives away from it in one of his Porsches, or flies from it in one of his planes, but then it is back, with his first coffee, his first meeting, nudging at him. Soon, 600 stockholders and some analysts from New York will be driving the Limited Parkway outside Columbus, Ohio, for the annual meeting of his company, The Limited. For those who aren't natives, the first sight of The Limited's million-square-foot distribution center is a shock. There is an eerie American vastness to the structures plunked here in a field in the middle of nowhere like stacks of metallic pancakes. Inside the building, music is playing. It always plays wherever Les Wexner is—in all his six homes, in his offices, in his 2,340 stores. It plays, even though he never listens, because he hates to hear nothing.

The driver of Wexner's station wagon delivers him, a long man in a gray suit a bit risky for Columbus. He has thinning, graying hair, small features, and ringed eyes so deep-set and shadowed they look sucked inward. Together with his jogger's hollowed cheeks, they sometimes give an undeserved cast of suffering to his face. His hands are in his pockets, rattling his change, which, as always, includes his lucky 1880 silver dollar. Before the meeting starts, he stands all alone for a while in the little protective pocket of solitude that surrounds power. Behind him, the rectangles on the corporate charts are all shoot-

Beside the Fifth Avenue view from his Columbus, Ohio, office.

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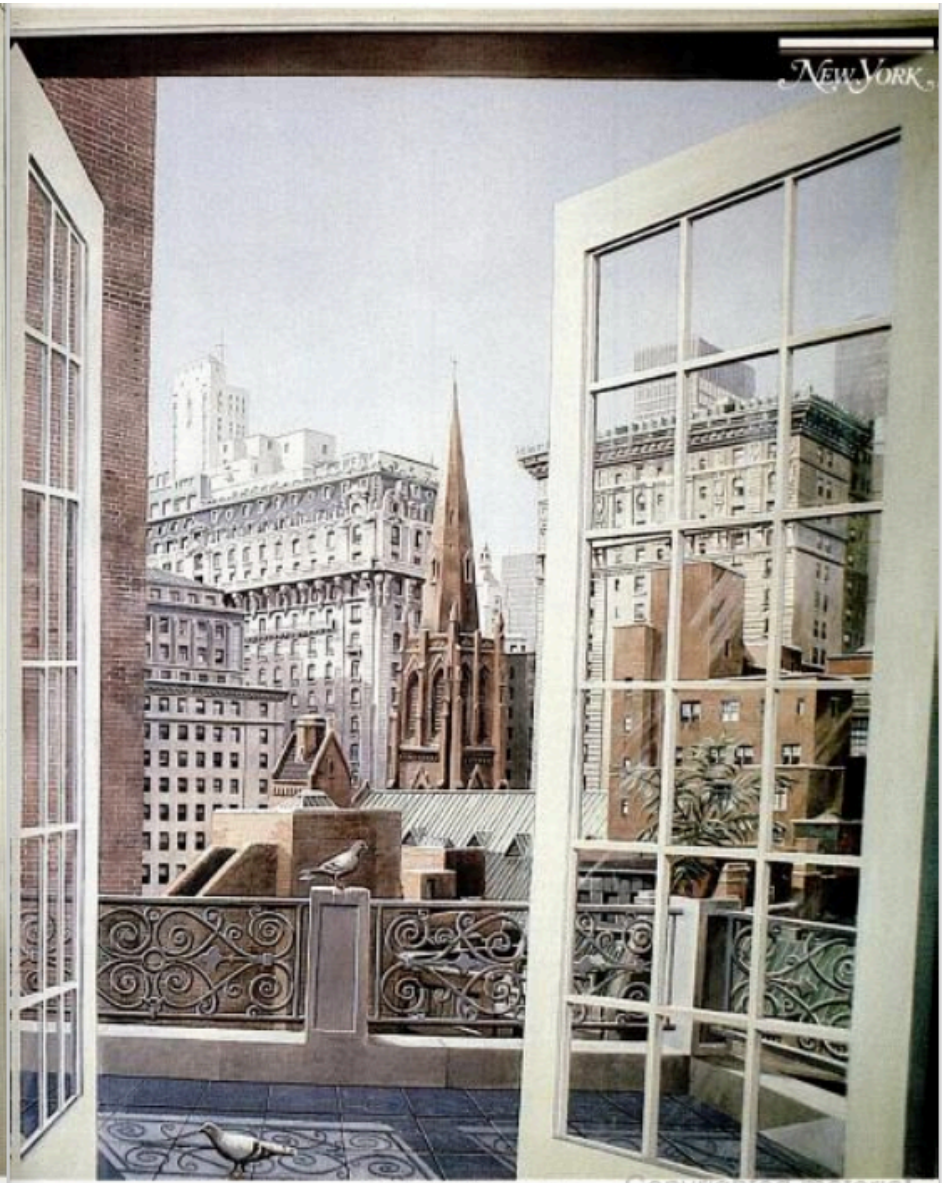

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NO MONKEY BUSINESS: *In the workout room of his Columbus house, across the street from the governor's mansion.*

ing up, showing that it has been a very good year for The Limited, the company *Forbes*'s 1984 survey called the fastest-growing, most profitable "specialty-apparel retailer" in the country. That means sports clothes (The Limited), fat clothes (Lane Bryant), young clothes (Limited Express), cheap fat clothes (Sizes Unlimited), catalogue clothes (Brylane), and the teddies and garter belts of Victoria's Secret—all designed to jump out at you from the competing commotion of shopping malls, where most of Wexner's stores are.

To Wexner's left are pictures of models wearing the kind of clothes that will be seen this fall when he opens The Limited at 62nd and Madison, the store that will replace Porter's. It's the new order. It's Les Wexner's vision. It's not for the dowagers who, seeing the restored landmark façade, will come in hopefully for their raspberry linen sheaths and white bead necklaces to wear to the golf club. They will be met with a blast of Bendelish splendor. Kenzo. Krizia. Forenza. They will be grumpy, but they are already angry at Les Wexner for wanting to tear down the Wrightsman house in Palm Beach, which he bought for $10 million, and for taking over the old Gurney house on East 74th, which he bought for $5.8 million. The Limited should also surprise the regular Madison Avenue roamers when they realize that for the price of one Ungaro they can fill three shopping bags with the Limited look.

The Limited's board is assembling. Next to Wexner is Bob Morosky, his vice-chairman, who believed in Les so much that in 1972 he sold his house, lived in a small apartment so he could buy Limited stock, and now owns a former convent with twelve bedrooms. He is the one who realizes Wexner's dreams, a large heartland man with deceptively sleepy eyes who looks as if you could poke him with a stick and get no response but is one of those real demons of American business. There are two former professors of Wexner's, one of whom is now preparing a Harvard case study on the beginnings of The Limited. And there is his widowed mother, Bella Wexner, the secretary of the company.

Bella doesn't like her place and has her seat shifted next to Morosky, closer to Les. She wears a white suit, and her black hair is pulled up tightly from high Slavic cheekbones into a bun. She holds herself in a careful way, like a taller Helena Rubinstein, with that instantly acquired czarina majesty some Jewish women take on with age and great fortunes.

"This is a woman who was buying dresses 22 years ago and now has a personal net worth of over $100 million," Wexner says, explaining his mother's reluctance to talk. Les gave his mother 10 percent of the company. He also gave 10 percent to his younger unmarried sister and to his late father, whom he'd made chairman of the board.

"He was the son at all times," says his friend Pete Halliday, "early, middle, and late. He always gave the floor to his father."

This meeting room is like a carpeted womb inside the giant distribution center. The pictures are actually panels that slide open to reveal an entire city—miles of pipes and racks with thousands of dresses and slacks clicking by overhead like little sportswear soldiers.

"These things are stupid," says Wexner, who often refers to his industry as a "dumb business like selling clothes." He doesn't mean this. He is half in love with it, half in love with the other worlds that success has led him to. Not only finance, real estate (besides the Gurney house, he owns small chunks of New York), giant schemes, and takeovers, but art and philanthropy. He is on the boards of Sotheby's and the Whitney, about to leave the American Ballet Theatre's.

However painful it may be for him, Leslie Wexner is inevitably emerging. He has had an apartment in New York for fifteen years, but suddenly he finds himself discovered, written about in "Suzy." Ann Getty is on the phone before 8 A.M. He has lunch with Liz Rohatyn and her daughter, Nina Griscom. He is courted by women, for he is tender and gentle and a billionaire alone, and by charities, because he gives massively. He puts a trompe l'oeil mural of Fifth Avenue in his office in Columbus, but then he pulls back, flies out, disappears to the little dinners in the little city he says he prefers. The perfect

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Photographs: left, Harry Benson; right, Claudia Edinger/Camera Liaison.

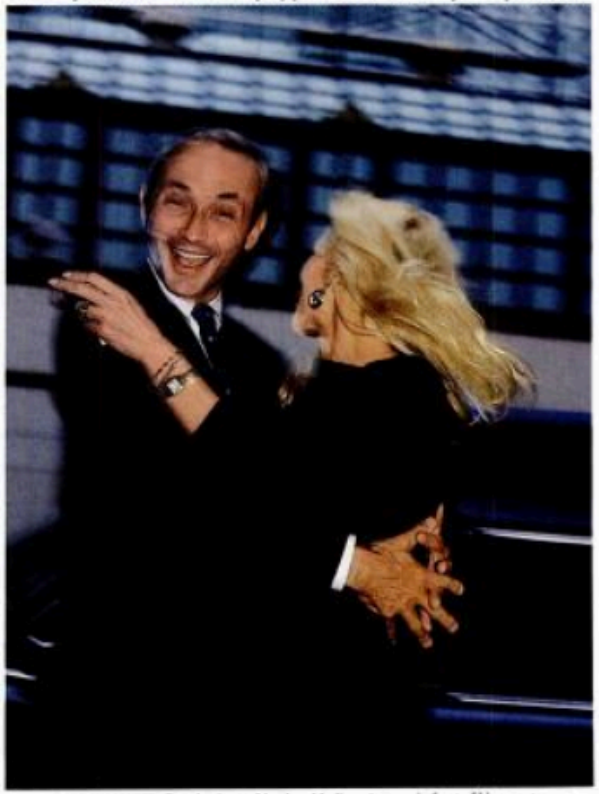
HE MET HIS DYBBUK AGAIN WHEN HE CLIMBED VAIL MOUNTAIN AND CHANGED HIS LIFE.

tease. He never goes to "things." Charities troop through his other, $3-million house at Los Incas in Palm Beach, but the host is never there. He and Morosky are fashion men who are proud they do not read *WWD* or *W*. He doesn't pronounce "La Grenouille" or even "entrepreneur" right, and it doesn't matter. His New York is a special blend of the constricted and hermetic and the very powerful. He is most comfortable running his company, and yet, like many men who make their money in business, he feels the lures. He wants to be photographed with his arm wrapped around a sculpture from the Whitney, not with models in his clothes. He has prepared himself for this emergence. He has worked on his body and on his mind by taking courses, talking to older, fatherly men who tell him what to read and discuss his philosophy. Still, he is reluctant, like the deb at her coming-out party, hiding behind a screen, tapping one foot slightly out of time.

Wexner tells the meeting about The Limited's year. Profits up 30 percent, net sales up 24 percent. This was the year they built this building and bought two chains. It was also the year of what he calls the "Carter Hawley Hale war," the year they tried and failed in a $1.3-billion hostile takeover of the company that owns Bergdorf's and Neiman-Marcus and is three times the size of The Limited. His friend Felix Rohatyn, who represented The Limited, says Carter Hawley Hale's actions were "the most irresponsible, reckless misuse of corporate responsibility I've seen in 35 years." His mentor Alfred Taubman says, "It was completely out of character for Les. He is not a good dirty fighter." Whenever Les and his men speak of the fight, there is a hurt, almost shocked tone, as though things like that weren't supposed to happen to gentlemen from the Midwest who make a tender offer of $35 on a stock selling at $22. Wexner's father used to call his son Bull because he was so stubborn, and Les will surely try again. But now they are digesting the Lerner chain of 800 stores, which they bought in the spring. He mentions the $100 million of Lerner's orders they canceled, causing another furor in the industry, and later says, "A lot of people did their laundry in our tub."

"WE ARE NEVER, never, never, never satisfied when the results are terrific," says Les, announcing the appointments of new division heads. Verna Gibson, who started as a buyer, becomes president of the 578 Limited Stores; Bob Greyson, a former sales trainee, takes over Lerner Stores—both moves reflecting the style of The Limited, which is to promote from within, so store managers become vice-presidents of distribution and "merchandise clericals" become "executive vice-presidents of merchandise," and the hundred top store managers get ski-lifted to the top of a mountain in Vail for the annual awards ceremonies, to jump and cry and thank the Lord and Wexner and The Limited as they clutch their awards. The room is now dark, and we are watching them on film as the music plays "I'm So Excited" and Wexner's eyes fill with tears.

This is the Limited Family, in which the paternalistic father rewards the good children, has made 51 of them into millionaires, and calls his 33,000 employees his "associates," though he might as well be saying "children." He takes good care of them, forgives their mistakes, and, even if the women have to check their pocketbooks before they go into the distribution center, they call him Les and will ask, and send their children to ask, for his autograph for as long as he can stand it at the annual company picnic. It's a clean family. He says his execu-



CLOSE ENCOUNTER: *Running into a friend on Madison Avenue in front of his new store.*

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"CONGRATULATIONS! THE BIG B!" HIS DRIVER SAYS, AND WEXNER SHRINKS AND CRINGES.

tives don't get divorced; they are good to their parents. Most of them have worked for him from the beginning and are fiercely protective around him. The most familiar sight is Les Wexner rising above a fringe of dark-suited men, in his car, in his planes, in his homes. This whole, seemingly humanistic company comes from Wexner's sense that his father worked for people who were unfair. For this reason, he signed the deal with Kenzo, because he felt Kenzo, too, had been badly used. And all of this is taking place in Columbus, because this is where Les grew up, poor, obscure, and alien.

"Les Wexner belongs in with Watson of IBM, Ray Kroc of McDonald's," says Tom Peters, the film's narrator, who included The Limited in his book *A Passion for Excellence*. "Two hundred million garments each year: three garments for every woman in the United States. . . " And, finally, Wexner on film says, "I like to believe trees *can* grow to the sky," and the music plays. "I'm about to lose control," and the whole room is filled with this evangelical fever like a Mary Kay meeting, the troops all whipped up in the way Wexner, though famously shy, can do it. Up, up, and up, and now he says, "To answer your previous question about when the stock will split . . . it is *now*." "Whoooooooooo," go 600 suddenly richer people.

"Jesus, one hell of a meeting," Morosky says to Wexner. "One hell of a meeting, Les." "One hell . . ." And they crowd in on him, all the high-school kids from the suburb of Bexley who got the red cars on their sixteenth birthday when he, the only "tuition" student from outside the district, had to run for the streetcar; all the pretty girls who never noticed him but now stand very close and knot their fingers behind their back when they talk to him and look wham into his mournful eyes, trying hard while Bella Wexner watches her 47-year-old bachelor son; the friends from Ohio State; a few fashion V.P.'s shooting their white cuffs as the national business reporters and stock analysts run to the phones. Wexner is getting that feeling he gets when people pull at him, because he is closed in himself, wanting approval and at the same time suspicious of others, like many vastly rich people wary of compliments and happier with criticism. He is thinking as he tells Morosky, "But now we've got to do it." And, as he likes to say, "It's good to be a prima donna, but tomorrow you have to sing."

FASHION PARADE: *Inside The Limited's million-square-foot distribution center, the last stop before the malls for most of the clothes.*

Photograph by Jeff Rycus/Black Star.

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AND NOW, PERHAPS, IT IS TIME TO REINtroduce Leslie Wexner's dybbuk, the demon that always wakes up in the morning with Wexner and tweaks and pulls at him. When he was a boy, his father called it *tummel*, a churning, so he feels "molten" and unformed, pricked by these spiritual pins and needles. He met this demon again when he was 40 and already worth half a billion, when he climbed the mountain in front of his house in Vail and almost froze to death and decided to change his life. This demon he calls "terminal *shpilkes*," which makes him wander from house to house, repeating the pattern of his childhood on a luxurious scale, wanting more, swallowing companies larger than his own. It is precisely the reason that Wexner has a billion and didn't stop at, say, 5 million and a new Mercedes every other year and what he calls "normal life"—bridge on Wednesdays and bar mitzvahs on Saturdays at the Winding Hollow Country Club in Columbus, which seemed "like Buckingham Palace" to him when he was fifteen. It is why he will have 2,500 stores instead of 250 or 3; why he has the six houses and is building a seventh, in Aspen; why he has two planes; why he dates more than one woman; why he has no children; why he has his boards, his collections, his Wexner Foundation. It is why he goes to Vail for a single night to look out at the mountain and hold the woman he has had flown in in his arms. It is why he isn't married, though after knowing him a year, one girlfriend converted to Judaism and actually changed her last name to Cohen (which Wexner insists was not because of him or because of what it would do to his mother if he married a Christian).

NO TIME TO LOSE: *Wexner's daily organizer.*

"I have all these ideas, and I'm frustrated because I can't do them all," he says, explaining that this is his "agony," as in *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, his favorite book, a book he felt so deeply that he could actually guess the next chapters. Never, never satisfied. Never good in his skin. So he begins and ends every day with the feeling that he hasn't done enough and has been disorganized, even though when he looks over his daily schedule chart, which shows how he has spent every half-hour from 8:30 A.M. to 9 P.M. and has space for the day's ten goals and for an evaluation of every meeting, he still feels he has wasted his time. And this is all tied up with his feelings about death and settling down, because he doesn't want to get too comfortable. For him, that is too close to death, which he met on the mountain. One of his favorite theories is that most people retire when they are 30 and buy a home and have children. But if you buy six homes and flee into the skies, never surrender, then . . . "I hate to think of myself as an adult, because when you do, you die." There are no more hurdles. His *shpilkes* keeps him out of balance, emotionally stunted, a part of him—the precious, treasured boy-son part—lagging behind. Instinctively, people don't waste Les Wexner's time. They talk quickly; they become—his favorite word for his executives—"focused" because he is so intense.

Even though he is a man who sells women's clothes, he explains that he feels like Michelangelo, who always wanted to sculpt but was told to paint. "I got great pleasure, *almost sensual pleasure*, from our attempt to merge with Carter Hawley Hale," he says. "The punishment would have been never to be able to try. Everyone says I must be doing this for the power or the money. Not at all. I don't want to be blocked from trying my ideas, from being creative.

"Whether Land of Polaroid, or Ford, or Watson—they all had a concept that fascinated them. In 1965, I was sure imported clothes would be important, so I started going to Europe once a month and then the Orient and acquiring the factories." In 1978 and 1979, he opened three factories in China in a joint venture with the Chinese.

"He positioned himself so he was able to produce original merchandise," says Alfred Taubman. "He'd produce a sweater that sold for $100 elsewhere for $30 or $40, and it had a very similar look. He is above Lerner and Petrie in look, and below the quality stores. He created his own niche."

The analysts and stockholders are hip-hopping to beat it out of Columbus as fast as they can as the stock mounts in New York, and that night, Wexner leaves, too.

His Challenger jet is waiting; his men are with him. He eats three cans of potato strings, throwing them by the fistful into his mouth. He carries no luggage, because he keeps a dozen shirts at every home. When he was a boy, Les had one dress shirt, and on the Jewish holidays, his mother would wash it at night so he'd have a clean shirt to wear to shul.

His pilot has put a bottle of Dom Pérignon on ice, thinking that Wexner might want to celebrate, but Les thinks, Why celebrate? It's like in *The Fountainhead*, he says: Roark designs a building and wants it built, but as soon as it's going up, he is on to the next dream. So today is just another day.

In New York, Jim Sullivan, a retired cop who is his driver and a shareholder, who must have worked out what Les's 18 million or so shares were worth after they split, says, "Congratulations! The Big B!" Leslie Wexner shrinks and cringes and folds himself into the long black car he gives into when he is in New York. Part of his mind is thinking, "What price glory?" but this other part, a tiny, buried, unfashionable part that he no longer quite acknowledges, remembers washing mannequins and store windows, buying pants, and sleeping with his head on a briefcase in a Hong Kong hotel room while

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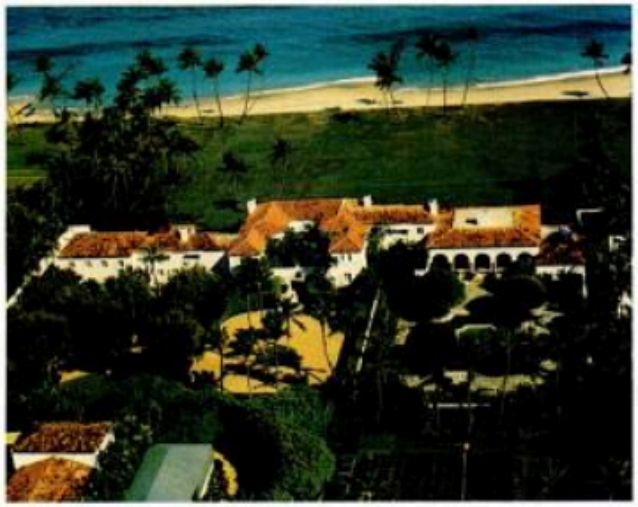

PRIZE PROPERTIES: *The Wrightsman house (top), the Gurney house, and the Columbus manse.*

Verna Gibson sat at a desk coloring sweaters. He thinks of crossing the Pearl River in a barge with Martin Trust of Mast Industries in 1979 and of the Chinese holding automatic weapons because it was the start of the Vietnam invasion—"two Jewish businessmen in search of good sweaters at a fair price"—and he thinks, "Hell, yes, I did it!"

THE DAY BEFORE THE ANNUAL MEETING, LESLIE Wexner sat on a stone wall, flanked by the dogs he calls the "Wexner kids," in front of his big house across the street from the governor of Ohio. In back of the house is a seven-acre dismantled polo field and a hill extended with 100 truckloads of dirt. He sat there rather awkwardly, in one of those studied positions that are meant to look relaxed, though it is not usual for Wexner to sit around in driveways, and one of his men had just called to tell him a visitor was on the way over. "This is a test for you," Wexner says to the visitor as Max bounds forward to sniff. Wexner moves into a paneled front room hung with awards and tributes to the steady, low-key but major giving of a truly charitable man. "Just Jewish stuff," he says. On the floor is propped a laminated *Wall Street Journal* story about Wexner. He often sits in this room, at his ornate French Deco desk, watching the mature trees shake in the Ohio winds. A houseman brings out each offering on its own linen cocktail napkin monogrammed L.H.W. The music plays "Come Softly to Me" totally unheeded.

Much of the rest of this house is buried in white carpet of the sink-into-me school, name art in the form of large but not superior pieces by Gottlieb, Rivers, Léger, Nevelson—a collection that Taubman says will "mature." The house has all the clichés of modern décor—sunken pits, wool and leather furniture, pre-Columbians, recessed lights, all the straight lines made into curves, bleached floors, chrome, marble, cushions with one deep serious dent, as though the Universal Cushion Puncher had been there and taken a sock. The only surprise is the lone violator ant that treks across a vast beige tweed desert.

The houses, like all Wexner's stores, look somewhat alike. With the stores, this is no accident, since every other Tuesday the displays are torn apart and rearranged. Pictures are taken in model stores, diagrams are made and sent to the other stores, so that by the following Monday they are identical. Wexner's homes are submitted to the Wexner vision as realized by his designer, Dick Himmel. Wexner first hired Himmel when the other decorators he had brought in refused to tell him their ideas, afraid he would copy them for free. But Himmel, who now designs all the Wexner houses and is doing the Madison Avenue store, told him everything and said that this was obviously a "starter house" for him. When Wexner bought the house in Vail, with its indoor-outdoor pool, Himmel told Wexner not to kid himself, guys like him and Walter Annenberg are all alike. They need space, domain. "That's the guy you're growing to be. You are not a normal person. You will find it enriching, a place to dream," which was just what Wexner wanted to hear.

It was a confirmation of what he had always known. He had grown up shifting from city to city, without roots until Columbus. He knew he wasn't normal in school, where he was such a disappointment that at least twice the principal had to call him in and remind him of his I.Q., which was over 140. "He was not very visible; he was the boy who came in late, when we all knew each other. He didn't go to our parties. He's more distinguished-looking today than he was then," says Pete Halliday, the captain of the football team when Les was the

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Photographs: top, Bill Dehn/Camera Graphics; bottom left, Peter Mauss/ESTO; bottom right, Harry Benson.

THE GARMENTOS TOOK HIM FOR A RUBE. "THEY'RE POSITIVE THEY'RE SKINNING YOU," HE SAYS.

manager, who went on to do Wexner's first underwriting at $7.25 a share and sit for a while on his board.

"I never knew anyone who made $15,000 a year. My parents worked 70 hours a week, and both never made $10,000," says Wexner, but he was very aware of the other world. He did have rich friends, and he read books about the Rothschilds and how they went from pawnbrokers to bankers. It was possible, for his father had come from Russia to work in a tin-can factory when he was thirteen. He had taught himself and become a store manager by the time he married Bella Cabakoff, who was then a buyer for the Lazarus stores. Once, Les's father drove three hours in a snowstorm to ask for a $5 raise for one of his employees at the Miller-Wohl store he managed. The boss said, "Will he quit if he doesn't get it?" When they settled in Columbus, Les's mother returned to work, and they opened their own small women's store, called Leslie's for the golden son. After he dropped out of law school, he helped in the store while his parents were on vacation. Immediately, he saw that Leslie's was not big enough for two people to make a living from it.

"I THOUGHT THAT IT would improve business if we only sold sportswear, because it was the only profitable thing. If you make money in chocolate ice cream, why sell other flavors?" he says. Since his father disagreed, Les borrowed from his aunt and started The Limited, which was limited to sportswear. It was just the right time, for women then were driving to malls in their A-line skirts and ribbon-trimmed cardigans. He worked with the same attention to detail his father had taught him, fussing over the tape on the packages, wanting computers in colors to match the store, getting out the bucket with the vinegar and ammonia to wash the windows because, if he did it ten times a week at $5, he'd save $50, and writing his payroll on Sundays because he had no bookkeeper till he had three stores. He flew to Milwaukee every week, then to New York, where on his first trip he couldn't find his way from 110 West 39th Street to 1407 Broadway and got in one door of a cab and out the other.

Wherever he appeared, the garmentos took him for the rube lawyer or the accountant, not even the buyer, never the boss. "They are so positive they are skinning you here," he says.

In Columbus, he was living in a $19,000 house, and no one would lend him the money for the mortgage. He would get up and jog to the cleaners, let the maid in, and eat salami sandwiches. When he made his first money, he bought a house big enough so the maid could live in. He took his bachelor life and removed all the discomforts.

His first stores were British-pubby-looking, with brick fronts and mullioned windows. His next stores were pointlessly neo-club, with burlap walls. It was then that Alfred Taubman, whom he didn't know, summoned him to Detroit. "He is a very big man, and he didn't say a word to me," says Wexner. "We had coffee and then got into his helicopter, which was waiting out back, but he still hadn't talked. He flew me to three shopping centers and stopped at my stores, and then finally he turned to me and said, 'Do you wonder why I called you? Your stores are a *blight* on my shopping centers.'"

"He immediately got on it," says Taubman. "At big expense to himself, he redesigned and got the look he has today."

UNDER WRAPS: *The Madison Avenue outlet, due for unveiling this fall.*

After the first six stores, he went public, in 1969. Against the advice of Arthur Cullman, the board member who had been his marketing professor at Ohio State, he borrowed money so he would be ready to begin his acquisitions. He grew the first 300 Limited stores himself from 1963–79. By then, he was buying as he continued to build—and he now has 360 Lane Bryants; 380 Sizes Unlimiteds; 72 Victoria's Secrets; 764 Lerner's. He started the younger, cheaper Limited Express, now with 186 stores, and seven catalogues. Not only was it cheaper to buy than to build, to take over old favorable leases than acquire new ones, to install his own management team, but there was also the dybbuk saying, "More. What next?" He went too fast and got into trouble in 1979, so he turned operations over to Morosky and did the buying himself. He was always competitive. He told one manufacturer that he wanted to give him a huge jeans order. Jeans were selling at Petrie's and Lerner's and Miller-Wohl for $17.99—he'd sell them for

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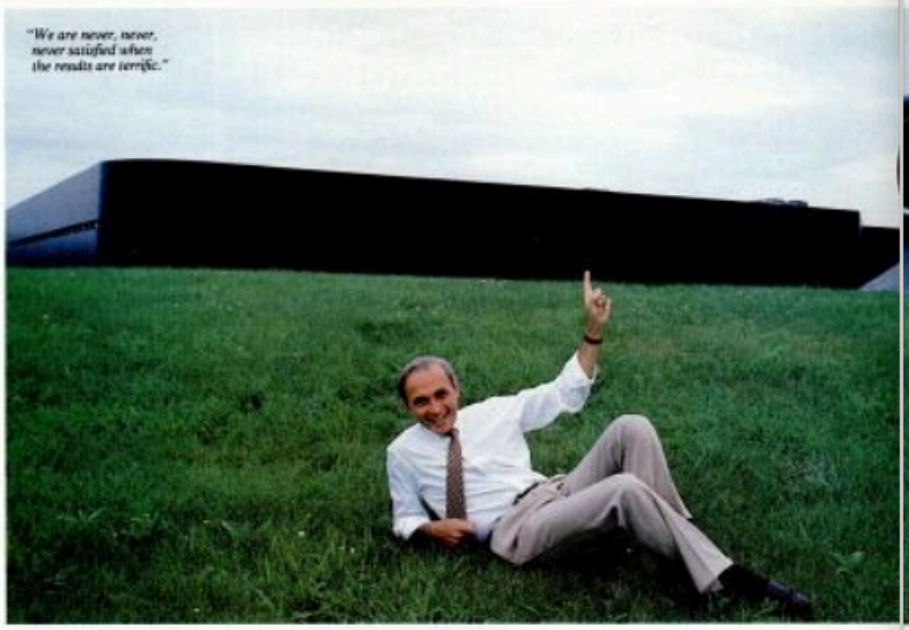
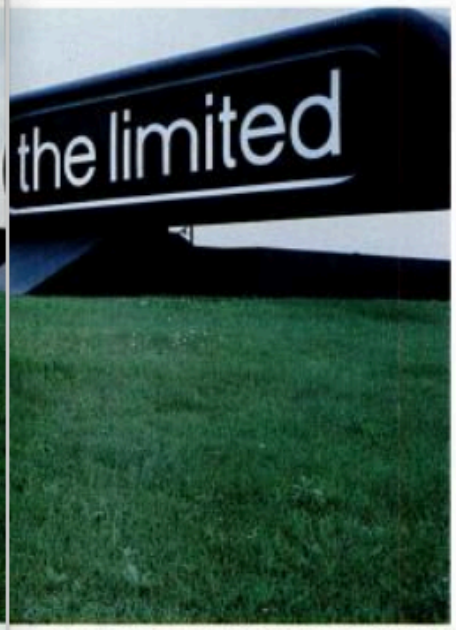


"We are never, never, never satisfied when the results are terrific."



HE LEARNED THAT THE LATER A MAN IS, THE MORE HE WANTS TO SELL HIS COMPANY.

$15.99. If they went to $9.99, he'd sell them for $7.99. He panicked the industry, but he used the jeans to bring traffic into his stores.

As he built, he was helped by a series of business "rabbis," a chain of mentors from his rival Milton Petrie to Taubman. Petrie, though he didn't mean to, taught Les the possibility of thinking big—why only 10 stores, why not 50? Arthur Cullman gave him his basic business books and a business vocabulary, and told him to subscribe to the *Harvard Business Review*. His father gave him the nervous sense that "his lease could always be canceled," and taught him never to retire unless he had something to retire to and to be prepared for deceit and disloyalty. He told Wexner his greatest pleasure would be seeing the business grow and teaching others. Instinctively, Les knew leverage, he knew to stick to the women's business, to promote his workers and make them enthusiastic, to pay his executives well and keep them. He learned never to hire a lawyer he has never met, or work with someone he doesn't like, or borrow from people who don't bother to understand exactly why they are lending to you. He learned that the later a man is, the more he wants to sell. He used that lesson in October, when he first met with Meshulam Riklis, the head of Rapid-American, who, incidentally, had been flunked by Art Cullman at Ohio State. It was then that Les knew he would buy Lerner's from him.

"I was difficult for him to do business with," says Les. "Lyman Brownfield [a Columbus lawyer who was Richard Nixon's law-school roommate] said I have 'an Oriental mind.' Riklis has one, too, but his is from a different part of the Orient. Mine is Chinese, his is Turkish. I am difficult to read. I look and smile and do not tell you what I think. People say, 'Don't you ever talk?' but I'm like the Chinese. They just sip their tea and look at you. Riklis was two hours late for the first meeting. He said he'd been furniture shopping with Pia Zadora, but I knew. I've bought a few 'rugs' before. The later he was, the more patient I was. The less he talked about business, the more I knew what he wanted.

"It's a mentality, like Carl Rosen at Puritan. I was at a meeting in his office to buy Calvin Klein Jeans, and he was an hour late. After fifteen minutes, I was stewed. No one could be so late without calling, and then we went into the boardroom and the waitress served Rosen an entire lunch and no one even asked me if I wanted coffee. No one could be so bizarre and so rude unless there was something he really wanted." When Wexner gets angry like this, his eyes darken, he talks slower, and his voice gets lower and lower. It's the voice he used when he was bargaining to buy Lane Bryant, another company bigger than his. At one point, he said to Lane Bryant's lawyer, "I think I'm going home now." He did, and he got the stores.

A CONTROLLED, UNDISTURBED LOOK PREVAILS throughout Wexner's homes. The only way to know he is there is by the constant music and the heavy black compartmentalized Hermès attaché case, which he designed, resting on a table. In the closets hang his gray double-breasted Ralph Lauren suits with very peaked lapels, in the drawers his invariably maroon socks, his two-button-cuff shirts. And, wherever he is, out comes the houseman in white with the napkins that allow no room for another initial.

Wexner is what used to be known as a "confirmed bachelor." He doesn't feel alone. He doesn't seem to want a child, and, despite what he says about the perfect woman—Ali MacGraw as she was in *Love Story*, someone who is "very, very pretty" and not aggressive—he seems to be waiting to achieve some mystical harmony and balance in himself first. "A lot of people think because I am not married I am asexual or homosexual, but I enjoy a relationship with a woman," he says sometime later, hating to discuss this, known for keeping this part of his life very tucked away. Of course, like his social absence, this increases his mystery and allure. Only Alfred Taubman, among his friends, still constantly tells him to get married, but Wexner, whenever asked, says, "Me and the pope."

Les insists on his own things in place—the Wexner possessions—and, if he is across the country and knows they are laying a carpet in one of his homes, it bothers him. It's a deep fussiness—he gets a physical on every birthday, does cardiovascular exercises, puts snow tires on his cars. He has always had a sense of how things should look, from the time he decorated his first room, when he was a boy. "He would have been an interior decorator if he was not in this business. Fashion, fabrics, colors—this is what he likes," says his friend Rabbi Herbert Friedman.

"I would have been an architect," says Les. "But no, if I had it to live all over again, I would be me. Not Felix. Not Alfred." There's an old Jewish saying that everyone has his little *pekl*, his bundle of trouble. But if everyone was to throw his bundle into a ring with all the others, he'd go back and pick up the very same bundle again. Les would pick up his dybbuk, his *shtikes*, because it is part of his genius.

As Wexner talks in this first meeting, he uses his dog Max as a social tool to mask his unease. He is quite different from his vice-chairman, Bob Morosky, who strolled through the lobby-size rooms of his larger mansion dressed in full good-old-boy fishing gear, holding a can of Coke and wearing an OHIO button. Morosky is married, with two daughters and a son. "I work to enjoy the fishing, and I fish to enjoy the working," Morosky says, a man in balance. Wexner, despite the American touches of Docksiders, wrinkled khakis, and a pen clipped to his shirt, is wearing a Missoni sweater and has these old tired European eyes, born wary. He drops his change all over the sofa, his hands shake, he looks ready to bolt, he pauses long, as though suppressing an old stutter. It is actually not typical of Wexner, but he says he is worried about the annual meeting next day.

"We are yin and yang," he says of Morosky, who used to be his accountant. "He is the most objective man I know. He tells me where all the imperfections are. . . . I'm a looser thinker, I have no sense of numbers or how much business I do. I can't remember my phone, or what my houses cost, but I can think out what the world will be in seven years."

Wexner always knew he was different, and hated the feeling. It wasn't only his position as an Orthodox Jew from a kosher home in the Midwest. As a boy, he always worked. He always worked for himself. He always had two jobs, one on Sundays. It was just assumed that when he wasn't doing his own jobs he would help his father at Miller-Wohl, that he'd come in to wash the glass and make the boxes because his father had always worked as if he owned the store. "I felt quite proud to be a worker," he says, even when he mowed the lawn of the girl he was dating. Since in the early years his family moved so much, his parents became his friends. He always felt he had to stay close.

From the first jobs, Les understood volume—that it was better to take eight kids to the park, or charge for shoveling snow by the depth of the fall. And he always knew that he saw things differently—he would walk into a room and see what it should be—that he should buy a 125-acre warehouse site when he had only 70 stores because he would grow into it or build his million-foot distribution center because he knew he would grow into that, or that it was time to go to Europe and to open his factories in China, or to borrow money at the time he went public to have it around when he would need it for the new acquisitions. He knew that he could see things, like how to design downtown Columbus, or form schemes for political fund-raising based on the competitive egos of the rich men he dealt with, or which single dress in a line would sell best. In law school, with his peculiar vision, he set the curve for the best and worst answers because he couldn't distinguish a right answer from a wrong one. He sat there and drew pictures of stores.

He tries to explain the obligation he felt: "I was seven and it was my mother's birthday and I took her to lunch, but there wasn't enough money to go to the movies and buy her a present and I wanted to buy her white gloves. She said she didn't need them. And I said, 'I really want to buy you a present, Mommy,' and she said then I wouldn't be able to go to the movies." She always set high standards, "as close to 100 percent," and she also gave him the idea that anything was possible. She was very brave. "You can do it, we can do it, the world will be perfect." She was "straight ahead," whereas his father would see all sides of a situation and tended to be indecisive, though to Les, he always seemed stern.

"Most people can't figure Les out," says Professor Cullman. "He's the enigmatic but energetic leader. He's the product of a female-dominated childhood—his mother, assertive, effervescent, bright, and action-oriented. His dad was contemplative and rather shy, uncertain of himself. As a male in a female-dominated household, he became both shy and dominant at the same time. A very unusual combination."

Though now Bella Wexner is often in Florida, and they no longer go on buying trips to Europe together, her office in Columbus is right next to his, and she is a force. It was Bella he asked to make the motion at the board for the tender offer for Carter Hawley Hale. Ask Les what is new in his life and he will say, "Mother just gave $3 million to the children's pediatric

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The Deck: 9:30–9:30 every day. $2.95 adults, $1.50 children and senior citizens. For information on the Observation Deck at the World Trade Center call: (212) 466-7377.

NEW YORK BEGINS AT THE WORLD TRADE CENTER

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HE DOESN'T WANT TO LOSE COLUMBUS, BUT SOMEDAY HIS CHALLENGER MAY NOT FLY HOME.

hospital in Columbus." He has not forgotten how she used to come home at night and start all the housework after her day in the store, how everything in his house was always clean and right in its heart.

WEXNER RESISTS WHAT IS HAPPENING TO him now. He says he hated making the Forbes 400 list: "Someone could get robbed and kidnapped . . . people get crazy. Already someone offered me an eel farm. A lot of rich people love it. Côte Basque. Grenouille. And the maître d' knows you, and you press $10 into his hand, but I like the anonymity. When the doorman says, 'Hey, I read about you in *Forbes*,' some people like that, but I don't. . . . You see in their eyes that they recognize you. I stopped in the bar of a hotel here in Columbus for a glass of water, and the bartender gave me one of those looks that my face had registered. I'd rather do without it."

Wexner's secretaries never say what city he is in. The chief of police lives in his house in Vail. He's taken a course in executive security. There have been incidents. One morning in Columbus, he was jogging, and a woman jumped out at him from behind a bush. He lives not far from an asylum, and escapees ring his bell in the night. Once, the intercom rang right after he had let out a visitor. Thinking it was the guest coming back, Wexner got on with a cheery voice. It was a crazy person, and he bolted himself in his bedroom.

The Limited is famous in the industry for the same secrecy. "We're not going to spill our guts to *WWD*," he says. No one can discuss a Limited order. "I had to lock them up," says one manufacturer. Doors to his warehouses are slammed shut. The firm releases disinformation. A salesgirl approached a Victoria's Secret customer who was writing in the store. "I *need* to ask why you are taking notes," she said. "We would have tried to throw that person out," says Les. "The sense of urgent secrecy builds the esprit. The club knows the secrets. It makes it better to be in the club," he says.

Wexner doesn't talk about sweaters. He doesn't talk garmento language. Nor for that matter does he talk about books, except *The Agony and the Ecstasy* and *The Fountainhead*, or art. What he talks about is himself, his restlessness, his desire to make a difference. It's the Mountain that did all this to Les, moved him up onto the peaks of noble visions, made him examine his life. He had never been to a psychiatrist or a psychoanalyst, but at 40, he could see the patterns. He thought, "It is freezing. I could get hypothermia. Nobody knows where I am." If he did die, what would be said about him? "Why did God put me on earth? God doesn't say, 'How many stores do you have, Les? How many Mercedeses? Do they know you at "21"?'" And these questions really began to nag at him and torment him.

He had already gone to see John Galbreath, a local older businessman who became one of his advisers. By 1977, his business had grown dramatically. He was in Columbus less, traveling and straddling, spending less time with the friends who didn't understand, who, when he first began collecting Barbara Hepworth sculpture, used to ask what those white rocks were. They said he had outgrown them. "When I had a mediocre year in 1977, and only made $6 million, they delighted in it," says Wexner. "I felt very alone. I had been a golden boy to myself and never had a major reversal, and now I had bopped myself on the nose. I felt like I was going broke, and I was terrorized." Galbreath, too, was a self-made man who had reversals. Les told him that he was confused about how to behave. Galbreath told Les that jealousy is the simplest emotion, and that it was a sin not to use the skills God had given him, which didn't mean very much at first to Les. He gave it a year or two of thought.

He realized that when he was asked about his success he used to say, "Oh, I'm just lucky, and I work hard," but now he saw it was precisely because of his skills and different vision. So he embraced the differentness he had always been fighting and indulged it all the way. He decided to give his money away now rather than have a foundation do it when he was dead. It was partly superstition, the idea that God helps those who help others. He made one of his lists. He plunged into Columbus, the United Way; he made a plan to rebuild the downtown, to help his synagogue and Ohio State, to send boys to scout camp, because it had meant a lot to him. He cultivated senators, met Ronald Reagan and told him he was proud of him. He says Reagan looked at him, dumbfounded. He became even more active in Jewish causes. He not only gives a million a year to the UJA but is using the Wexner Foundation to set up what his partner calls "elite commandos" and a "cadre of Jewish lay leaders." He used his skills as well as money and became a secret consultant to three or four businesses. He helped his friends. "Seven years ago, he sat down with me one night at Joe & Rose and told me how to save my business," says Dick Gilbert of Zena Jeans.

"My skill was to work," says Les. "People say, 'Why work hard?' but it's a creative thing." Like Picasso, he says, who kept churning out work and couldn't be paid to stop. "In his heart of hearts, the plow horse knows the racehorse is different."

LES WEXNER DOESN'T WANT TO LOSE COLUMBUS, where he is so big. "This is not Goodbye Columbus. You see me here, how I am rooted here," he says, "and though it would make business sense to move to New York, it doesn't make emotional sense." For this is Bexley, the suburb his family couldn't afford, and now he is "Les" in the way Charles Lazarus of the Lazarus stores is "Chuck," and he is asked to speak at a Bexley graduation, which he will refuse. Staying here, even with only one foot, is part of his refusal to grow up and let go, leave psychic home and mother.

But someday in New York, that transforming dinner will occur. It will be small, at Felix's apartment maybe, and Les will sit with Kissinger or Bill Paley and an impeccably serious blonde Jewish beauty who will understand him and find him sexy. He'll open his mouth and say things that make people nod and laugh, and he'll be sucked in. And that is the night Les Wexner's Challenger won't fly back to Columbus.

Les is not set back by the big things like Carter Hawley Hale—he buys Lerner's. Or by the little ones. If his driver is out getting coffee, he leaves a note and walks. If they can't find his reservation at Nanni Il Valletto because Morosky and Grayson have taken it, he gets another table.

There will always be another house with better moldings in a farther city, a newer Porsche or older Mercedes for his collection, the next painting, a prettier, higher mountain with more powdery snow, a bigger company ready to be taken. Milton Petrie is getting older and has no successor. Phil Hawley still rankles.

Les Wexner picks up his heavy black case and flies off in his Challenger, with his dybbuk sitting next to him, taunting and poking him with impatience, that little demon he really loves. The dybbuk turns his face. What does he look like?

"Me," says Les Wexner. ■

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